

# Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

*Looking diagonally across College Way toward 21st Avenue. Left, the ruins of the Congregational Church, and right, burnt-out buildings on 21st, July 20, 1919. Courtesy of Friends of Historic Forest Grove.*

## The Great Fire of 1919

By Edwin Dey

Most towns in the American West began life with a downtown district largely built of wood. As a result, most Western towns also suffered disastrous fires.

Forest Grove was no exception. Prior to July 19, 1919, Forest Grove had a verdant, tree-dotted "village green" in its center, surrounding the white Congregational Church between College Way and Main Street. The open churchyard, where the farmers tied their teams on market days, gave the town a sort of uncrowded New England flavor.

The Thursday, July 24, 1919, Washington County News-Times (now the Forest Grove News-Times) carried a front-page headline: "Holocaust of Flame Sweeps City Sunday."

"On Sunday afternoon at about one o'clock, occurred the most disastrous fire in the history of Forest Grove. At an hour when the streets of the city were more nearly deserted than at any other time, Sunday afternoon, the fire demon chose an opportune time to spread his deadly ravages over a goodly portion of the city's business district ..."

"... How the fire started or just where, is not definitely known. ... Mrs. Ernest Brown, who lives across the street from the O.M. Sanford secondhand store, on North Main Street, had just returned from church, when she observed some smoke coming from what appeared to her to be in the vicinity of the rear of Mr. Sanford's place of business. At that moment she gave it little thought, merely thinking that some one had previously built a bonfire and that it was only the smoldering embers from it that she had seen..."

"Imagine her surprise a few moments later when H.W. Danielson, who lived in the Staehrl residence property across the block directly east of the Sanford building, knocked at the door and informed the family that the Sanford building was on fire. In company with Mr. Brown he rushed across the street and the two broke in the door. Mr. Brown's little son, Wendall, mounted his bicycle and spread the alarm.

"The firemen were on the spot in a remarkably short time and lines of fire hose were deftly and quickly laid to nearby hydrants and the fight was on for the control of the devastating element. Quickly the maddening flames leaped to adjoining structures, and it soon appeared hopeless to attempt to stop the flames from destroying the building they had entered. After vainly striving to quell the fire by pouring two streams of water on the seething inferno, the plucky firemen

were compelled to withdraw their forces and pull the hose with them. They were then directed toward saving adjoining property.

"The photograph gallery across the street from the Sanford building, owned by Miss Belle Darling, was then on fire, and the adjoining buildings owned by J.N. Hoffman threatened, as well as the Caples building, the plate glass front having been ruined by the intense heat. The Copeland & McCready lumber yards were on fire many times. The building occupied by the photograph gallery was burned and the two-story office building next to it, both owned by Mayor J.N. Hoffman, suffered heavy loss, but by untiring efforts the Caples building was saved from destruction.

"Had the fire succeeded in gaining headway in that block, it would have been next to impossible to have saved the business portion of the town from utter ruin, as the wind was blowing from the northwest and carried burning embers all over the town."

A swath had been cut through two blocks of the center of town. Sixteen buildings were destroyed or heavily damaged. The First Congregational Church—replacing the original pioneer structure, which had burned down a few years before—was destroyed, along with the Public Library. Destroyed or heavily damaged were an unoccupied building north of the library owned by J.S. Thompson, the Washington County Poultry Association building, a three-story residence on College Way owned by A.B. Thomas, K.N. Staehrl's residential property, occupied by H.W. Danielson; the Palace Garage, operated by the Taylor brothers, a frame building occupied by the Valley Realty Co. and owned by J.H. Shearer, a building occupied by C.H. Adams Millinery and owned by J. Wheelock Marsh, the new Odd Fellows building, occupied by M.S. Allen and Co. Hardware, an unoccupied building owned by M. Peterson, the O.M. Sanford secondhand building, the vacant building of the Marble and Granite Works, the Leabo Livery Stable building, the Caples & Co. building and the J.N. Hoffman building housing Miss Darling's photo gallery.

The loss of their near-new church was devastating to the Congregationalists. Although they had long preserved the village green surrounding their church, the expense of rebuilding required a sacrifice. Portions of the block were sold.

While the present incarnation of the First Congregational Church still occupies the original site, numerous other buildings—all built of brick or concrete, mostly in the 1920s—have covered what was once the village green.

The great fire of 1919 had changed the downtown face of Forest Grove.

## The Forest Grove History Room

By *Martha J. Khoury*

Those who enjoyed the recent house and garden tours sponsored by Friends of Historic Forest Grove and the Historic Landmarks Board may have noticed the note in the guide booklets that proceeds benefited the Forest Grove History Room.

What exactly is the Forest Grove History Room?

As longtime Forest Grove residents die or move away, old diaries, papers and photographs are often discarded by well-intentioned relatives.

Such materials may have historic significance, and if so should be preserved. To do that, we need a repository for them.

Would you like to know about the people who built your house, or what it originally looked like?

For the benefit of townspeople and students of history, the History Room will house historic documents and research material, making them available to the public. Reference books and publications about Forest Grove history and historic preservation also will be available, and the room will serve as an office for Friends of Historic Forest Grove.

The Forest Grove Chamber of Commerce has generously donated a copier, and funds are being raised to acquire archival storage cabinets, office furniture and a computer, as well as operating funds.

The Historic Landmarks Board and Friends of Historic Forest Grove hope to open the Forest Grove History Room by the end of this year.

We are working to acquire space in the old National Bank Building, on the corner of Main and Pacific. We anticipate that the History Room will be staffed by volunteers several hours each week, and will also be open by appointment.

By *Jim Casto*     **Recycling the Past**

While many think the recycling of glass, paper and metal is a relatively new practice—mainly to protect the environment—recycling is actually a very ancient idea. Even in prehistoric times, old metal was melted down and recast into new implements.

As modern manufacturing made goods and materials more plentiful, we began to abandon recycling without much thought—throwing away and discarding what was no longer useful.

So it was with structures. Our society began to destroy buildings no longer deemed valuable. Old buildings were simply ripped apart by heavy machinery, and the rubble hauled away to the nearest landfill.

Just as it has now become more popular to restore old buildings to preserve our culture, it is also becoming more popular to recycle old building materials. In the event a structure is deemed to have no practical value through restoration or renovation, its materials can be salvaged to repair or renovate other old structures whose historic value justifies their preservation.

Most restoration and renovation guidelines call for “like materials” to be used wherever possible. That means if a certain type of board or fixture was used in the structure’s original construction, similar materials should be used in the renovation.

Since bulldozers do not leave much salvageable material, old structures containing usable materials must be dismantled piece by piece.

In *The Oregonian’s* Home and Garden Section for January 8, 1998, appeared a feature about such a building, a 92-year-old farmhouse in Washington County.

The dismantling of the building was organized by Rejuvenation House Parts, a Portland firm specializing in antique building materials, and Metro, the local agency responsible for waste management. The actual dismantling was carried out by Architectural Recovery, a business well-versed in the process.

Some 26,000 pounds of building materials, which previously would have occupied a large chunk of a landfill some-

where, was instead taken to St. Vincent DePaul’s Wood Depot and sold, much as they would sell discarded clothing or kitchen appliances.

Aside from environmental concerns and the use of “like materials,” another reason for recycling building material is the fact that older wood has a tighter grain and is stronger than new wood, according to Bill Welch, supervisor at Rejuvenation House Parts.

Also, the dimensions of finished lumber are not the same today as they were many years ago. Even some of the designs for wainscoting, siding and molding are no longer available.

Perhaps more importantly, recycled lumber can be cheaper than modern lumber.

The *Oregonian* article used the analogy of a “donor,” much as we think of organ donations. Some of the material from the Washington County farmhouse was used in a 1910-vintage house being rehabilitated in Northeast Portland.

Much of what our society discards today can also be used in the yards of today’s homes. While not acceptable as “like material,” plastic is now being recycled into artificial lumber and fencing, and glass is being recycled into paving stones and tiles, according to another Home and Gardens article for June 11, 1998.

Below is a list of agencies and companies that deal in recycled building materials. Note that inclusion in the list does not imply endorsement, nor exclusion imply rejection by the Historic Landmarks Board or the City of Forest Grove:

Rejuvenation, Inc.  
Old House Restoration Service  
Home and Garden Depot  
Rebuilding Center  
Hippo Hardware  
Cascade Resource Salvage  
Wood Depot (St. Vincent DePaul)  
Aurora Mills-Architectural Salvage  
Metro Recycling Information

For more information on the articles cited above, refer to the back files of the newspaper in the city library, or contact *The Oregonian*.

## The Taylor Hollow Concrete Wall House

By Cheryl Hunter

In the early 1900s, a man named John Taylor developed a process for building structures with hollow concrete walls. He used his process in Ohio and Florida until, sometime around 1920, he moved to Forest Grove and patented his new building process under the name of the Taylor Hollow Concrete Wall method.

Taylor then formed a company, Thormost Building Corporation, with his sons, A.H. and J. B., and with business partner C. W. Mertz. He began building houses and commercial buildings in and around Forest Grove, and also licensing his process for use in other parts of the country.

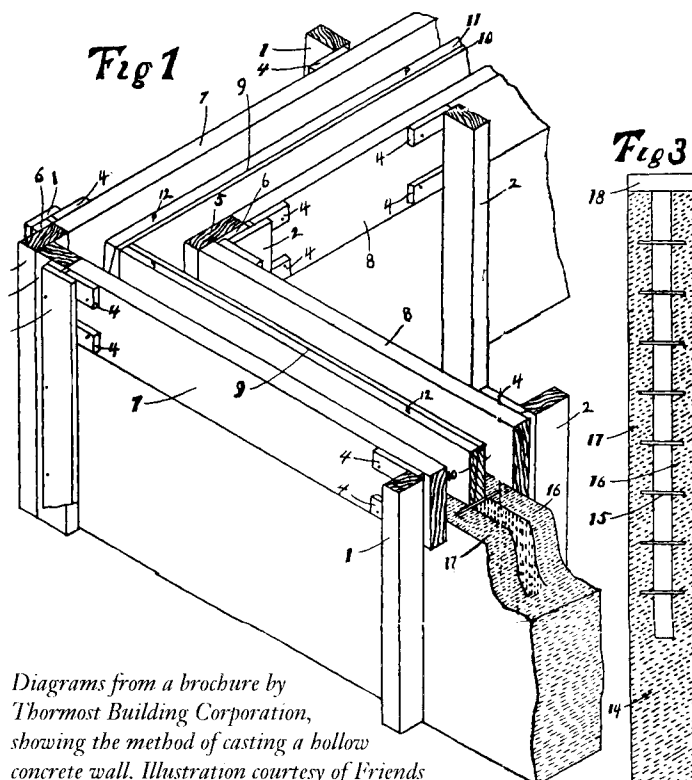
The Taylor hollow wall process involved casting a double concrete wall with an internal cavity, the two sides tied together with metal ties. Movable forms, both external and internal, were moved up the wall with each pour of concrete until the desired height was reached.

The internal air space extended entirely around the house, from the footing to the rafters. This air space could be either dead air or used for ventilation.

Both walls and air space could be built to any thickness. For residences, the sides of a wall were typically two to three inches thick and the air space between them 1½ inches, for a total of 5½ to 7½ inches—similar to a wood-frame house.

Aside from that insulating air space, what was the attraction of a hollow concrete wall building?

According to the company's brochure, four men could set the forms and build the walls of an average seven-room



Diagrams from a brochure by Thormost Building Corporation, showing the method of casting a hollow concrete wall. Illustration courtesy of Friends of Historic Forest Grove.

house in four to five days. Another benefit was reduced fire insurance premiums, due to the comparatively little flammable material used in the house—a matter of great concern in Forest Grove since the great fire. A third benefit was the reduced cost of construction, due to less lumber and labor being needed. Plaster was applied directly to the concrete walls, eliminating the need for laths before the plaster.

Many examples of this innovative building process can still be seen in Forest Grove. Among them are the F.D. Gardner House at 1545 Main Street, the Dr. W.R. Taylor House at 2212 A Street, the Otto Osborn House at 3837 Pacific Avenue, the Parson House at 1825 Mountain View Lane, the C.L. Wagner House at 1318 Birch Street, the J.S. Buxton House at 1924 Pacific Avenue, and the house at 1806 Elm Street.

In Hillsboro, the Linklater House, at 230 NE Second, is on the National Register.

Taylor also built several commercial buildings, including the Forest Grove Memorial Chapel at 1920 Pacific Avenue and, in Gaston, the H.A. Krahmer garage, which used to be the Gaston Fire Department.

The Dr. R.W. Taylor house, built in the Dutch Revival style, is one of Forest Grove's more attractive houses.

Dr. Taylor wrote to John Taylor: "I have been living for the past two years in the Hollow Wall Concrete House you built for me. If I were going to build another house, I would have nothing else but the Hollow Wall Concrete type. I like it because in the hottest day I can find a cool place in it. It is also very easy to heat."

Since John Taylor licensed his building process nationwide—charging a royalty of 5 cents per square foot—we may never know how many Taylor hollow concrete wall houses were built in the nation. However, you can see for yourself the enduring quality and charm of those built in Forest Grove.

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## Preservation on the Web

By Jim Casto

If you have Internet access and you are looking for information regarding historic preservation, here is a good place to start:

<http://www2.cr.nps.gov/>

This is the website for the Heritage Preservation Services, a department of the National Park Service responsible for historic properties. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., it works hand-in-hand with the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs), local governments (such as the City of Forest Grove's Certified Local Government), Native American tribes, other federal agencies, universities and colleges, and nonprofit organizations and foundations.

One of the main features of this website is "Preservation Briefs," a series of essays on a wide range of problems in repairing historic buildings, using methods and approaches that are consistent with tax incentive programs and authentic preservation. Currently there are 41 briefs, with more in the planning stages. One of the newest is on earthquakes and seismic retrofitting for historic buildings.

An area for the National Park Service's Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems (CRGIS) enables various agencies to access information on cultural resources and their geographic locations.

Another section covers the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program for structures on national and local registers. Check here to see if incentives may be available to you and your historic building.

If you have a family member enrolled in college, the Historic Preservation Internship Training Program can provide budding historians, archeologists, architects, curators, planners or archivists with an opportunity to work with an

experienced professional in the field of historic preservation.

Everything from tax credit information to National Historic Landmarks can be found here, as well as links to other National Park Service Sites.

Another website that might be of interest is the National Trust, at: <http://www.nationaltrust.org/>

Two sites to supplement your television viewing are:

<http://www.pbs.org/aboutyourhouse/>

the website for Bob Yapp's "About Your House," which appears on the local Public Broadcasting Service KOPB Channel 10, and:

<http://www.oldhousejournal.com/>

the website for "This Old House," also carried on KOPB.

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